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AUTHOR Raybin, Ron
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ABSTRACT

An effective teaching method, the technique of changing crucial characteristics of a literary work and presenting students with unsuitable alternatives leads the students to their own discovery of the artistic appropriateness of the original. Examples may be seen in each of three representative areas of English: (1) poetry--substitute words to alter sounds, rhyme, rhythm or meaning; (2) fiction--change character behavior or motivation, plot, title, point of view, structure, or style; and (3) composition--teach variety by examining poorly written paragraphs, topic sentences, and conclusions; teach transitions by altering or removing them. (JMC)

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The Technique of the Infelicitous Alternative

By Ron Raybin

Pasadena High School, Pasadena, California

With my application of the discovery method of learning, I have used a simple technique that has been effective with many students. This method involves the use of infelicitous alternatives or, the find-out-what-it-isn't-to-discover-what-it-is approach. From *The Red Badge of Courage,* for instance, I wanted my students to grasp the appropriateness of Crane's metaphors, to understand that they were both carefully created and meaningful. Of course, *I* didn't want to be the one to say so. In Chapter 2, Crane writes of two long, thin columns of men that march over the brow of a hill and vanish rearward as they emerge from a wood: "They were like two serpents crawling from the cavern of the night." The question I posed was, "Why not like three bunnies hopping?" The class immediately attacked the inappropriateness of the hopping bunnies image and, on the same basis of understanding, explained why two serpents crawling was an apt physical and psychological comparison. It takes only a few more of such infelicitous alternatives before a class is able to discuss and understand Crane's word pictures without the urging of a substitute. After students apprehend the nature of this technique, *they* can concoct the unsuitable alternatives, thus deepening their involvement.

What follows are three representative areas of English with some suggestions for applying this teaching method.

POETRY

1. If you wish a class to discover how sound supports meaning, change the sounds. When Poe writes in "The Raven," "And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain . . ." you might have the class discuss as an alternative, "And the quiet woeful unsure movement of each purple curtain. . . ."
2. Students can be made more aware of the precision of language in a poem. To encourage some aesthetic recognition of the relationship between word choice and meaning, I have chosen some short poems and altered a few lines. The class is given

two versions of a poem with corresponding line numbers and informed as to which lines have been doctored in one or the other of the two versions. After jotting down which lines in which versions seem more apt, students justify their choices in a class discussion. After the battle, I present the original poem and allow further discussion as warranted.

Here, for example, are portions of Selma Robinson's "Country Night." (The class, of course, is given two complete versions.) Lines one and eight differ in the two versions, and students are to choose one of each as being more effective.

Version I

1. She lived alone in the country night . . .
6. The night was water, and it seemed to her
7. It rose relentlessly and unresisted,
8. Inevitable, black, and sinister.

Version II

1. She lived in terror of the country night . . .
6. The night was water, and it seemed to her
7. It rose relentlessly and unresisted,
8. Inevitable, wet, and sinister.

Selma Robinson's poem begins with line one from Version II and contains line eight from Version I.

3. If you wish a class to make discoveries about rhyme or rhythm, change those and have a two-version comparison as above.

FICTION

1. Teach character consistency by altering a character's behavior; hypothesize an unmotivated inconsistency. What does the class think, for instance, of Brutus demanding financial remuneration on the morning of the Ides of March as payment for his leadership? What about Walter Mitty, two-thirds through the story, doing something actually heroic and then dominating his wife?
2. To consider the significance of motivation, lend a character faulty motivation. Suggest that Oakhurst's suicide in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" was motivated by boredom. To pass the time he, being a gambling man, played Russian roulette and lost.
3. Let the class consider plot manipulation by considering an extreme alteration of the plot. The cocky protagonist of Lon-

don's "To Build a Fire" gets saved at the end but his dog freezes to death. The victimized farmer in Garland's *Under the Lion's Paw* finds buried treasure at the last possible moment and pays off his self-seeking landlord.

4. What about the relevance or significance of a title? Consider "The Secret-Keeping Heart" as an alternative to "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Chosen Pathway" in lieu of "The Road Not Taken."
5. How does the point of view relate to the work? What would happen to *Huckleberry Finn* if the point of view were third person and not Huck's? Would *Moby Dick* be much affected if the point of view were Ahab's?
6. Why is a work structured as it is? In Chapter 1 of *The Red Badge of Courage,* what would be changed by having the youth's flashback about his enlistment occur chronologically and not as a flashback? Consider a short story being stretched to a novel or a novel being condensed to a short story.
7. An author's style can be studied by altering sentence structure. In *The Old Man and the Sea,* Hemingway writes of the old man's humility: "But he knew he had attained it and he knew it was not disgraceful and it carried no loss of true pride." Remove the "ands" and let the class consider the string of main clauses as three simple sentences instead.

COMPOSITION

1. Teach variety as an aspect of writing style by having the class discuss dittoed paragraphs which ineffectively repeat words and phrases.
2. Have the class discuss (or even write) intentionally disorganized paragraphs to discover what coherence is. The same can be done for unity.
3. Teach topic sentences or conclusions with sample compositions that you have infected with losers.
4. Teach about transitions by altering or removing them.

The infelicitous alternative can lead to a student discovery of what you want to teach as the class discusses and explains why the alternative is less effective or invalid. Frequently, the more absurd the alternative, the quicker a class is to grasp the *concept,* seeing beyond the particular example to a useful generalization.